Setting Refugee Youth Up for Success in High School and Beyond:

A Call for Partnership Among Public Schools and Community Organizations

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Disclaimer:

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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Narrative

It is the middle of the school year in Seattle, Washington and Dawit Tariku has just arrived to his first class at Franklin High School. He flew in by himself a week earlier from a rural town in Ethiopia. Dawit came to America first because his passport was expiring soon, leaving his two younger siblings behind. The plan was for him to be reunited with his parents in Washington and to continue his 9th grade education right away. When I first met Dawit, he had only been in America for three months. His smile, charm, and sense of humor were infectious and he was proficient in English – he hardly had an accent! This was impressive considering Amharic is his first language and the language he primarily uses to communicate with his family. Over the next couple of months, I began to learn more about Dawit as he shared with me the challenges he faced being a foreign-born student living in America. Dawit started his first day at his new school right before winter break, making it extremely difficult to make friends and fit in. Fortunately, his cousin Niomi told him about a youth program at Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA) right across the street from Franklin High School that she attended after school. She told him that they provide free snacks, tutoring, English help, and even go on fun field trips. The next day, Dawit went to ReWA with Niomi and has been coming every day since.

Introduction

Dawit is the son of refugee parents who fled to America due to religious persecution in their home country of Ethiopia. Like Dawit, more and more refugees are fleeing to the United States than ever before. In fact, the U.S. accepts more refugees than any other country ("Refugees: A Fact"). By the year 2017, the U.S. will welcome

100,000 refugees—30,000 more than the current annual cap (Gordon). According to the United Nations, at the end of 2014, "60 million people worldwide were forcibly uprooted by conflict and persecution…the highest ever recorded number" (D'Urso). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) reports that over half of the displaced people in the world are children. As a result, there is an increasing need for more U.S.–based youth programs to offer wraparound services, which follows a holistic approach to provide individualized support for refugee children and their families (Appendix A).

Refugee youth are severely underserved by the public school system. Although public schools are welcoming these students into their classrooms on a regular basis, formal systems that meet their academic needs are minimal to none. It is clear that more school-based programs are needed to better support refugee youth so they can effectively integrate into society and achieve academic success. After-school programs deter refugee youth from getting involved in criminal activity and other risky behavior. A Carnegie Foundation report discovered most risky activity among youth occurs between the hours of 3 pm and 6 pm (Hollister 4). This is because the majority of refugee parents are still at work and unable to monitor their children's actions and behaviors. After-school programs, such as ReWA, not only offer tutoring and homework help, they provide an enriching environment that keeps youth safe and off the streets. These programs are highly beneficial and drastically improve language and social skills of refugee youth as they learn to navigate an entirely new culture. Lala Demirdjian, independent researcher and Executive Director at Armenian Relief Society, insists, "Education is a basic human

right that should be provided to all children with no exception" (8). Furthermore, Article 26 of the Declaration of Human Rights reads:

> Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (qtd. in Demirdjihan 8)

Education plays a key role in preparing the next generation to be contributing members of society and future leaders of our country. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) insists that education will help break the cycle of poverty. They state, "Educating children gives the next generation the tools to fight poverty and prevent disease, including malaria and AIDS" ("Definition"). We must equip the next generation with the tools and skills they need to succeed in life because both our futures and their futures depend on it.

In response to the decreasing high school graduation rates among refugee youth living in America, public schools must financially invest in and partner with local, community-based organizations to better serve this population and drastically improve these rates. When schools and community agencies collaborate to better serve this population, more refugee youth will be reached and taught the skills they need to achieve academic success, resulting in higher graduation rates. In doing so, refugee youth will be taught the skills they need to succeed beyond high school and will learn to be contributing members to our society and economy.

Background

Oftentimes, the general population cannot differentiate between a refugee and an immigrant. The 1951 Refugee Convention is a legal document that defines who a refugee is, their rights, and the legal obligations of states ("1951"). This document spells out a refugee as a person "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" ("Refugees"). The difference between the two is that immigrants choose to move to another country and get to decide where they want to live. Refugees, on the other hand, are forced to leave their home countries for fear of their lives and often do not get to choose what country they go to. Newly arrived refugee students "have typically experienced both displacement and trauma and now face the task of adapting to a new environment, frequently involving the simultaneous acquisition of a new language" (Anderson et al. 1). What's more, they often act as the sole interpreter for family members who need to communicate with their teachers, causing even more pressure and stress. Refugee youth have witnessed unthinkable acts of violence in their home countries, such as witnessing the brutal killing of a family member, and experiencing psychological trauma that often goes untreated (Farmer). The pressure and expectations from both home and school only perpetuates the trauma. Considering that today's refugee youth are the next generation of workers and future leaders in our country, it is crucial for them, at a minimum, to complete their high school education.

Review of Literature

Refugee Youth High School Dropout Rates in the United States

Refugee youth flee to the U.S. either by themselves or with other family members to seek asylum from persecution in their home countries. As a result, many suffer from severe trauma, having witnessed horrific acts of violence, including death of their friends and family members. They are forced to overcome many barriers on their own as they learn to navigate the educational system in America. In their article, Rebecca A. Tyrer and Mina Fazel state, "The UNHCR estimated that at the end of 2012 there were 10.5 million refugees worldwide, of whom approximately half were under the age of 18" (1). Half of the world's refugees are children who flee to neighboring countries for safety and refuge. An article published in The Ohio School Psychologist explains that refugee children are uprooted from their homes and impacted by physical and emotional trauma, starvation, and confinement (Doran-Myers 1). Another major challenge that refugee youth experience is the language barrier (Doran-Myers 1). Some refugee students may have not even been enrolled in school prior to their arrival to the U.S. According to an article published by Deseret National News, "Despite a national increase in the overall graduation rate, the dropout rate for foreign-born refugee and immigrant students remains above 30 percent, three times that of U.S.-born white students, and twice as high as the dropout rate of native-born Latino students" (Krebs). In addition, statistics show that English Language Learners (ELLs) are three times more likely than their native English-speaking counterparts to drop out of school (Boden et al. 187). It is clear that more needs to be done to support refugee youth and increase their likelihood of graduating high school.

There are many factors that contribute to refugee youth dropping out of high school. The trauma that remains with them from fleeing their home countries to the arduous process of resettlement is profound. Jody L. McBrien states, "The trauma experienced by refugee children can impede their ability to learn" (344). As a result of their tumultuous backgrounds, refugee youth are considered to be an extremely vulnerable population. Alba Lucy Guerrero and Tessa Tinkler discuss the vulnerability of adolescent refugees stating, "Displaced youth represent a particularly vulnerable population forced to adapt to a new way of life while also undergoing important developmental changes" (55). As compared to their peers, refugee youth have the additional challenge of navigating two very different cultures between home and school, which can often lead them to engage in risky behavior. A research study conducted by Jody L. McBrien found that among Asian refugees, most teenagers resorted to drugs, violence, and sex as a result of peer discrimination and family admonishment stresses (346, 347). Refugee youth feel the pressure to assimilate quickly at school but given their refugee status, they are often seen as helpless or childlike by their teachers and peers. Guerrero and Tinkler explain that labeling someone as a victim not only has negative implications on their development; it may also change the expectations the school and workplace has for them (72). Research has shown that refugee students do not excel when low expectations are placed on them (Guerrero and Tinkler 71). Guerrero and Tinkler suggest, "A conversation needs to occur among aid agencies as well as research communities about when using the terms *refugee* or *displaced* is productive and when it is overused to describe pathology" (71). Thus, it is crucial for teachers and refugee youth workers to be culturally sensitive and avoid labeling their students. In her study,

Jacqueline Mosselson discovered that refugees and immigrants are among the country's highest achievers when they have adequate access to appropriate levels of education (461). However, she also found that an unsought consequence of refugee students' academic achievement is the assumption made by teachers that this means they "are all fine" (Mosselson 461). She explains, "While their high academic achievement marks the refugee students as becoming integrated into the academic culture, it simultaneously masks their emotional isolation and feelings of marginalization" (Mosselson 461–462). Thus, it is extremely important for systems to be set in place, both in school and outside of school, so that refugee youth are given the tools and support they need to overcome the challenges of displacement.

Current School-Based Services for Refugee Youth in the U.S.

The school is an ideal setting for traumatized refugee students to be in a secure and predictable environment that provides comprehensive services to help reduce and assist in recovering from emotional trauma (Doran-Myers 2). An article published by the Oxford University Department of Psychiatry states, "In disrupted environments, schools are often one of the earlier institutions to be introduced and, throughout the world, most children can attend school. Therefore the school is an environment that can potentially access children and their families" (Tyrer and Fazel 2). Not only are schools a familiar and safe environment for refugee students who have previously attended school, it is the ideal setting for parents and teachers to collaborate together to improve the child's overall academic success. When schools are able to build relationships with families and gain their support, they are then able to implement programs that help "maximize cognitive,

emotional and social development" (Tyrer and Fazel 2). Furthermore, Theresa S. Betancourt et al. found:

> Engaging schools and families in supporting the success of refugee children may help to address these multifaceted needs and prevent further cascades of problems in which dysfunction in one domain (e.g., academic failure) spreads and reinforces problems in another. (e.g., internalizing problems) (688)

When these needs are met, the likelihood of refugee students staying in school increases exponentially. Thus, school-based services and educational interventions play a huge role in helping increase high school graduation rates among this population. In addition, schools must challenge the current U.S. policy regarding age-based placement for refugee children who are often placed in grades that do not match their individual competency levels. School-based interventions must be tailored to address refugee students' unique needs in order to increase their overall academic success.

While schools in the U.S. continue to take in more refugee students, there remains a lack of cultural and social support for this population. Angelika Anderson et al. explain: "Although some countries have experience in accommodating the special needs of refugee children, many educational systems currently do not have special support systems in place to assist schools, refugee families and students in the process of adapting refugees to their new schools" (2). Not only are proper support systems not set in place but public school teachers often do not have the cultural training needed to best educate this population. The Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning state that despite the rapidly increasing numbers of incoming refugee students, classroom teachers

"often do not feel sufficiently prepared to meet the unique needs of these children" (qtd. in Szente and Hoot 220). Teachers need to understand the resettlement process and why accommodations and modifications of curriculum need to be made. Assimilating to a new culture takes time, especially given their histories of trauma and persecution. Professors Marjory Ebbeck and Valerie Reus discuss the need for patience and flexibility: "Parents and teachers need to remind themselves that becoming familiar with a new country or a new school can take time, often up to 6 months" (269). While it is crucial for teachers and counselors to recognize this sensitive process, it is also important for them to not mentally label their refugee students as "victims." Guerrero and Tinkler state, "Although it is important that aid agencies, schools, and communities recognize the unique needs of displaced youth because of their experiences with trauma, there must be a shift away from ascribing identities based on an institutional classification of displacement" (71). According to ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, public school teachers must contextualize their teaching "to fit the learner's experience base" (qtd. in Potocky-Tripodi 398). Teachers need to modify and adapt their lesson plans in accordance to the refugee students' competence levels. Schools should also consider using "thematic curriculum, individual learning plans, or alternative ways of gaining course credit, such as independent study or an internship" ("Effective"). A study conducted by Soua Xiong and Sarah K.Y. Lam explored the barriers and success factors of Hmong college students in America. They discovered that guidance counselors were a missing piece in helping students find their way through the educational system (Xiong & Lam 140). They also found that most of the participants "had little idea about counseling benefits, which is similar to findings in other studies on counseling utilization by ethnic minority college

students" (Xiong & Lam140). Refugee youth are often navigating the public school system on their own and do not utilize the few resources that are available to them, such as counseling, simply because they don't know they exist and/or it is considered taboo in their culture. It is clear that more culturally sensitive, school-based programs and interventions tailored to this specific population are needed. Refugee youth should not be left to fend for themselves.

Mental Health and Refugee Youth

Due to the trauma refugee youth often face, many suffer from behavioral health issues and undiagnosed psychological disorders. Having witnessed many horrific events in their home countries, refugee youth and their families are at increased risk of severe mental health implications. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) state, "Experiencing the loss of his or her first language, culture, and family values can have serious, long-term consequences for children, such as loss of feelings of self-worth, loss of motivation to learn, and breakdown of family relationships" (Farrell 210). Similarly, Laura Bates et al. state, "Research and practice reveal that refugee children – exposed to war and violence, displaced and separated from parents – may suffer from psychiatric disorders such as post-traumatic stress, anxiety, disruptive behavior, and psychosomatic symptoms" (633). Bates et al. also discovered that the more traumas experienced by refugees over an extended period of time, the greater the likelihood of adverse psychological effects (633). When Judit Szente and James Hoot interviewed counselors who work closely with refugee students, the counselors indicated "signs of posttraumatic stress disorders were often present in these children, and they welcomed working with teachers and caseworkers to provide additional mental health

services to address this disorder" (227). However, it is important for counselors and educators alike to remember that seeking mental health services is taboo in many cultures. I had the privilege of interviewing Beth Farmer, a social worker and program director for International Counseling and Referral Services in SeaTac, Washington in November 2014. I asked her why mental health is often stigmatized in many refugee cultures. She responded:

> [W]hat we have found to more often be true is that people are coming from communities where there is no mental health infrastructure. They don't really know what counseling is. They don't know anybody who has gone to it. Maybe the only thing they can reference historically is a mental hospital that is maybe poorly funded, the people may go in and they never come out…so therefore mental health is equal to severe mental illness. They are the same equivalent and they never see anybody recover from that and the repercussions of having that are pretty profound. (Farmer)

It is important for educators and the local community to help destigmatize mental health so that refugee youth get the treatment they need to excel in school and life. In their study, Bates et al. found that, at first, it was not culturally acceptable to participate in individual therapy (646). However, group therapy performed in school-based settings, which focused on socialization, had far more success among refugee youth participants (Bates et al. 646). Nevertheless, McGregor et al. discovered "The use of multimodal interventions, wherein difficulties at an individual, familial, and sociocultural level are addressed, seems particularly worthwhile for these adolescents, and present an avenue for promising further research as to their efficacy in such populations" (379). McGregor et

al. also found it necessary for programs to specifically center on the fortification of family, especially for those who come from broken homes. They also expressed the need for targeted interventions that focus specifically on mending and strengthening relationships between families that have been physically separated for an extended period of time (379). It is important to understand the problem with mainstream psychology in regards to the refugee experience. Mosselson states, "[Psychology] universalizes the refugee experience with the result that 'refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general'" (456). She also explains, "In the Western contemporary era, psychology and schooling are inextricably linked and schools, in concert with traditional psychology, acts as technologies of power that seek to create 'docile bodies'" (457). Based on the research, it is important for all people who work with refugee youth and their families to create a safe environment that is culturally inclusive and embraces heterogeneity.

A research study conducted by Tyrer and Fazel indicates, "The stressful experiences that many refugees and asylum-seekers are exposed to during forced migration, be that during persecution, flight and resettlement or in the changes they experience in their family, community and society make them vulnerable to a range of psychosocial problems" (1). When refugee youth have been exposed to war-related trauma, it directly impacts their mental health and overall wellbeing. When left untreated, the consequences include "behavior problems, mood and anxiety disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a range of other adjustment difficulties" (Betancourt et al. 682). This can have direct implications on their overall school performance if proper measures are not taken, such as psychological interventions. School-based and

psychological interventions go hand-in-hand in helping refugee students achieve success. In their study, Tyrer and Fazel found that "Achieving in school with regards to both education and peer relationships, is a key determinant of success and future mental health" (10). In an article published by Laura Pacione, she shared the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) model, in which emergency mental health and psychosocial support for refugee children should be implemented in a tiered manner (Appendix D):

> Represented visually as a pyramid, the base is dedicated to universal provision of basic services to ensure safety. The next layer of the pyramid involves strengthening community and family supports, followed by more focused non-specialized support provided to a smaller number of people. For individuals with the greatest need, specialized mental health services form the top of the period. (7)

This model illustrates safety and concrete needs being met at the bottom tier, first and foremost. Once their physical needs are met, than the rest of the tiers help meet their mental and perhaps even spiritual needs. All needs must be met and school-based programs/psychological interventions need to utilize this tier-based system as a model for all of their programs involving refugee students.

Public Schools Underserve Refugee Youth

Public schools have the tremendous responsibility of providing a high quality education to every single student who is enrolled at their school. Schools are intended to be a safe, stable, and familiar environment for students to learn and grow as individuals. In my opinion, refugee youth are severely underserved by the public school system. As previously mentioned, the high school dropout rates among this population continue to

increase. The National Conference of Staff Legislatures (NCSL) recognizes the many challenges refugee youth must overcome when they arrive in America. Ann Morse, Program Director of the Immigrant Policy Project at the NCSL articulates:

> Newly arriving immigrant teenagers have a very limited time to learn English, study the required material for high stakes tests, and catch up to their native English speaking peers before graduation. Consequently, dropout rates are significantly higher for immigrants and for LEP (Limited English Proficiency) youth.

When refugee youth are enrolled in public schooling in the U.S., they are met with the challenges of learning an entirely new social system than what they are used to in their home country. Kate Tilleczek explains, "For immigrant and refugee adolescent youth, high school is not only a place of learning, but also the *very context* in which acculturation, connection, and integration into the receiving society takes place" (77). Not only are refugee students dealing with the anxiety of being new, most experience discrimination for the first time because of their "ethnicity, culture, skin color, language, accents, religion or simply their newcomer status" (Tilleczek 76). Schooling is crucial to a child's overall development and wellbeing and is where primary socialization occurs (Tilleczek 76). Tilleczek reminds us that schooling is "a useful indicator of successful integration within the receiving society" for refugee youth and immigrants (76). Not only does it help refugee youth get acclimated to their new environment, it also helps familiarize their parents to the educational system in America. Refugee children explain the U.S. school system to their parents in their native tongue. As a result, parents learn how the U.S. grading system works and the schools' expectations of the students, in

addition to the important role refugee parents play in their child's overall academic success.

Public School Funding and Responsibility

Public schools receive funding from the state, local, and federal government. According to Atlas, a policy analysis tool from New America's Education program, $550 billion is spent annually on public schooling in the U.S. ("PreK"). However, it is important to note that within that amount of funding lies large disparities that vary from state to state, within states themselves, and even within districts ("PreK"). Although funding is administered from the government, states have the ability to divide up the funds as they deem fit. Nevertheless, public schools have more resources than most community-based agencies due to their size and the funding they receive from taxpayers. In addition, they are able to apply for educational grants through funders like The National Education Association (NEA) Foundation, which administers grants specifically to educators. Furthermore, on December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA) into law, which replaced the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB) that was enacted in 2002 ("Every"). The ESSA is Congress responding to the request of many concerned teachers and parents to create a better law that fully prepares all students for success in college and future vocations ("Every"). Both the ESSA and NCLB are reauthorizations of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was enacted in 1965 (OSPI). According to the U.S. Department of Education, the ESEA is "the nation's national education law and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students." While the NCLB shed light on students that needed extra academic support, it ultimately needed to be revised

"to create a better law that focused on the clear goal of fully preparing all students for success in college and careers" ("Every"). Moreover, public schools have access to "School Improvement Grants" (SIG) which is federal funding used "to turn around the lowest five percent of persistently lowest achieving Title I schools and Title 1-eligible secondary schools, so that these schools significantly raise student achievement and exit improvement status" ("School Improvement"). According to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington State, $506 million was appropriated for SIGS in the year 2013. When public schools and community-based organizations combine their joint knowledge and resources, they are able to provide more individualized support for refugee youth. After-school programs serving this population must include English language tutoring, homework assistance and positive youth development that focus on strong relationships with family and community ("Promising"). In addition, connecting refugee youth with U.S.-born youth and adults in a supportive environment fosters positive relationships and provides opportunities for the exchange of important information to occur ("Promising"). Through these exchanges, refugee youth also learn how to navigate U.S. culture – from accessing educational resources to applying for college and financial aid ("Promising"). Once public schools start taking advantage of the many resources they have access to and partner with local, community-based organizations that already work with refugee youth, I strongly contend that high school graduation rates will increase exponentially and that public schools will finally fulfill their obligation to provide an equal and high-quality education to all students.

Challenges for Refugee Youth and Their Teachers

Being a high school student is difficult enough for many adolescents as they are trying to fit in and find their identity. With that in mind, imagine what it must be like for a new refugee student who not only is learning to manage the many stressors of high school but likely struggles with their English and has had interrupted schooling or may not have even attended school at all. What's more, many refugee parents expect their child to get a job while also maintaining good grades. Tilleczek explains the many difficulties refugee youth face when starting high school in the US: "For immigrant and refugee youth, the pursuit of a high school education comes at a time in their lives that is marked by upheaval, uncertainty and profound changes in lifestyle and family fortunes" (76). Many refugee youth come from war-torn countries and have witnessed horrific acts of violence. As a result, many have untreated mental health disorders, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Betancourt et al. 682). They have experienced extended periods of separation from family and many come from refugee camps, which can house up to 42,000 of displaced people ("2015"). If students did receive schooling at a refugee camp, the student to teacher ratio was likely extremely high and resources were scarce. In 2006, Jeffra Flaitz wrote a handbook for educators entitled *Understand Your Refugee and Immigrant Students*. In it, she writes about the struggles teachers often experience when working with refugee and immigrant students. She indicates, "Teaching people who have been uprooted from family, friends, and familiar surroundings, traditions, and values introduces unique challenges that were not commonly found in the mainstream North American classroom of a decade or so ago" (Flaitz viii). These challenges include refugee youth arriving to the U.S. with no

documentation, including school records and report cards. As a result, students are placed in grades according to their age and not their competency. Flaitz acknowledges the lack of resources available to educators as more and more refugee students continue to arrive in American classrooms. Flaitz states:

> [S]tate-funded and federally funded programs have begun to assist with the adjustments that are required if schools are to effectively respond to the needs of immigrant and refugee students…[However] most are inadequate despite the intentions of project directors, whose efforts are too often thwarted by the sheer breadth of the task at hand. (Flaitz viii)

This is all the more reason programs such as ReWA (the program mentioned in the introduction) are so important and why their model needs to be replicated into other after school programs. The staff at ReWA understands the needs of the refugee and immigrant community because they have built strong relationships with the refugee community for over thirty years. They choose to walk alongside their clients, asking for continuous feedback so they can keep improving their services. ReWA values their relationship with their clients and understands the importance of remaining flexible and switching things up when need be. They are actually the ones that help improve high school graduation rates among refugee youth.

Refugee Women's Alliance: A Case Study

Over the past year, I had the privilege of volunteering at Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA) in the Rainier Valley district of Seattle. Formally known as Southeast Asian Women's Alliance, it was founded in 1985 by a group of resettled women "to provide newly arrived women with the services that were not available from other

agencies" ("Mission"). Thirty years later it is now a large, multi-ethnic, nonprofit organization that serves hundreds of refugee women and their families in Seattle and its surrounding areas. They offer a range of holistic services including job readiness training, a domestic violence center, early childhood education, English language classes, and behavioral health services. I had the opportunity to serve as a volunteer and mentor for their youth development program. ReWA runs their youth development program after school during the school year at their main office in Seattle. Andrew Gehl oversees all of the youth programs held at ReWA, Rainier Vista, and Seattle World School. Deepa Bhandaru and Jenilee Pilocarpine are the lead teachers for the youth development program. I spent a total of sixty hours in the classroom over the span of 20 weeks, building relationships with the students and teachers while helping the youth with their homework and conversational English skills. During my time with ReWA, I was able to interview seven students in the youth program. I met with three males and four females, whose ages ranged from 12-17 years old. I viewed this as an opportunity to get to know the students on a deeper level and learn how ReWA has helped them during their transition to the US, build a strong community, and navigate the school system. I asked them questions such as what brought them to ReWA, what they liked about ReWA, and what they thought ReWA could do better. Listening back on these interviews, I realized that ReWA *is* their community. It is not merely a safe place where students can study and play after school; rather, it's a place where the staff are really focused on developing them as individuals, teaching them life skills that will benefit them beyond adolescence.

In addition to the after school program offered during the school year, ReWA also puts on a summer program that includes fun and educational field trips. It is worth

mentioning that all of the services offered at ReWA are free of cost to their clients. I was able to assist with the summer program last year and was able to attend a couple of their field trips. Once a week, after lunch, we walked over to the Seattle Community Farm, a project of Solid Ground, which is another local social services organization. Students met with Farmer Scott who taught them how to properly care for plants and vegetables. The students planted carrots in the beginning of the summer program and were able to take home the carrots, in addition to many other vegetables, at the end of the program. On another day of the week, staff from "Cooking Matters," another project of Solid Ground, taught students how to make easy, healthy meals at home and often prepared food using the vegetables from the Seattle Community Farm. Every week, students visited Cheasty Greenspace, which is also in walking distance from ReWA, and learned from local foresters what kinds of vegetation and insects live in the forest. It is apparent that ReWA does an excellent job at fostering a sense of community among refugee youth who can easily feel left out and neglected. Every lesson and activity in the youth program is thoughtfully planned out and aims to increase confidence, independence, and personal leadership. This, among many other factors that I will further discuss, makes ReWA stand out and is a model that should be replicated in other after school programs serving refugee youth.

In addition to interviewing several of the youth individually, I also had an opportunity to conduct a focus group during the summer program. Before we met as a group, I had students individually answer the following questions on a piece of paper that I passed out:

1. What do you like about ReWA?

2. What do you think ReWA could do better?
3. What do you think might make it hard to finish high school?

After the questionnaire, I had everyone move their chairs in a circle and began the discussion. I made sure to have a "talking stick" and asked that only the person holding the stick speak while everyone else respectfully listens to what they had to say. There were 15 students total in the focus group, both boys and girls, ranging in age from 10-17 years old. The focus group lasted 25 minutes. The consensus on the first question is that they all really enjoyed coming to ReWA and appreciated the homework help. One thirteen-year-old student said:

> ReWA has helped me by making sure I don't waste my time doing nothing or getting into any trouble and ReWA has also helped me improve my grades and lastly, ReWA also helps students who need to focus more on their individual education, like if they need extra help. (Buhari)

Another student, who had recently moved to Seattle from Ethiopia, shared, "ReWA helped me to be confident to ask people to help me with my work and stuff and I think ReWA has helped me be more sociable and to know people and ReWA has helped me with my grades and to do better in my schoolwork" (Wolde). The second question regarding what ReWA could do better brought some interesting and insightful answers, including providing better snacks and recruiting more volunteers to help students with their homework. One student, who has been attending ReWA since he was in elementary school and is now a sophomore in high school stated:

> ReWA could, in my own opinion, get more and more people because I feel lonely just being here by myself, come on, I have been here for seven

> years. Ok, um, and get better equipment, because see this board? Been there the whole time, the whole time… and more volunteers because if there's more people, we need more volunteers. (Nguyen)

The last question was less about ReWA and more about what they see as potential barriers to graduating high school. While I did not get as much data as I was hoping for as the groups' attention span was coming to an end, a couple of the students shared some answers worth mentioning. A fourteen-year-old girl shared, "I think one thing would be maybe English would be hard sometimes and to make new friends" (Azikiwe). Another high school student stated, "I think it's hard because you can't find friends in high school, it's hard to find friends in high school, like for me and its hard to fit in in high school because some people might make fun of you for who you are" (Mamo).

I decided to add on a couple more questions at the end of our focus group. The first question was asking how students navigate living in two different cultures. One of the girls who came to America with her family when she was 10 and is now 14 answered, "In the beginning, when you first get into it, it's really hard but then if you have people that support you and friends and family, it makes it really easy to make friends and to learn English and your culture" (Dama). The same student who recently came from Ethiopia shared that it's difficult for him to switch back and forth between his native language and English. He stated, "It's hard for me to speak two languages. I can't actually express myself in English as much as I can explain myself in Amharic so it's hard for me" (Okeke). The last question I asked centered around the high expectations many refugee parents have on their children in regard to their education. Several of the students said their parents expect them to finish high school and get good grades. One

student in particular stated, "My parents want me to get A's, and get my homework done, and finish high school and to become a great student" (Asfaw). Another student chimed in stating, "My parents expect too much! I heard from my friend in this program that in Vietnam that grade school over there is from like 1-5. So they don't know how hard it is being a high school student in the USA" (Bikila).

Joanna Rummens et al. indicates, "Parental expectations for their children's socio-cultural integration and educational success are often very high. However, given the various challenges to be met, actual outcomes do not always match these hopes" (77). Gehl discussed some of the barriers refugee youth face. He explains:

> Educationally speaking, being an ELL student is twice the work compared to any other student because every assignment that you have is also an English assignment and the barrier that I see is, a lot of times we have students bring in work that seems way above their reading level and it's frustrating for me because it's like what is going on at this school where this student is not getting the work that will help him or her? (Gehl)

Teachers at ReWA end up having to supplement with their own materials when it is clear the student's needs aren't being met at school. He also mentioned, "Having refugee youth evaluated by standardized tests, in which they are compared to students who are not ELL students is also another severe challenge" (Gehl).

In 2014, ReWA served 550 students in all of its sites combined (Gehl). While this appears to be a relatively large number, it is important to note that only 15-20 refugee youth attend the after school program on a daily basis. When compared to other after school programs such as Boys and Girls Club and YMCA and what sets ReWA apart,

Bhandaru states, "We try to go to higher levels of actually giving them spaces where they can explore and develop personally… and get to connect with adult mentors and ideally become leaders within this space and that translates into other aspects in their lives" (Bhandaru). She explains that one of the benefits of the program is that on any given day, they don't have more than twenty kids in their classroom. She says, "It is one of the things that works to our advantage because we can really give the kids that we do work with a lot of time and attention and a group and community dynamic can build, so I feel like we're really good at fostering a sense of community that you just don't have in other programs" (Bhandaru). I also asked Pilocarpine what she thinks ReWA does well and she stated:

> I think we do a good job at maintaining relationships with our clients, there might be one mom who is receiving a service but she can also place her children in another service with us or she can also get her citizenship for her grandmother, it's a really family-oriented place and referring to different services within ReWA. It's a safe place for them. (Pilocarpine)

ReWA's youth and summer programs have been in existence for over eight years and are primarily funded through the City of Seattle. ReWA also receive a small amount of funding from United Way of King County and a couple private foundations along with a small grant from the federal government. Each funder has specific criteria and outcomes that must be met by ReWA in order to keep their funding. Gehl remarks, "When you're working in Deepa's program, it's the youth development program and ReWA is funded to do that program by the City of Seattle's Human Services Department" (Gehl). However, at the Rainier Vista youth program, only tutoring services

are provided because they have fewer funds than the youth development program at ReWA. It is challenging to get students to attend a program that solely offers tutoring and nothing else. For this reason, ReWA takes some of the money from their United Way fund to build up the program so that the kids there are also learning youth development. Gehl shared with me that last year Seattle World School, a public school whose student body is predominantly refugees and immigrants, lost its funding and now only offers after school tutoring. This is the unfortunate reality that social service agencies, such as ReWA, face on a regular basis. As Bhandaru expressed to me, "public money is shrinking… there's not as much money that governments are raising in part because of the ways that taxes are collected and so the money has shrunk a bit and also you have to think about how costs of living go up that the money won't go as far" (Bhandaru). She also discussed how the lack of funds impact the work of social agency workers:

> I would say that if you talk to a lot of people who work in the non-profit world or who even work in government or social services or who are civil servants, they would probably tell you that their workload, in terms of the outcomes that are expected to meet are pretty consistent. They are still expected to sort of this number of students, this number of clients, but the money they have to do that is less so you have to just make it stretch farther. (Bhandaru)

This poses the question: if public money for these organizations is shrinking and yet these programs continue to be in high demand, how can they sustain themselves? My proposed solution is through partnerships with local public schools.

The Need for Partnership and Economic Benefit of Refugees

There is an imperative need for public schools to partner with community-based agencies that serve refugee youth and their families. After school programs provide a safe and familiar environment where students can receive free tutoring while meeting new friends and building upon existing relationships. Due to language barriers and their blue-collar work schedules, parents of refugee youth are often still at work when the student returns home from school and therefore cannot help their child with homework. The benefit of having after school programs hosted at the school provides a sense of relief for the parents knowing their children are in a safe environment and students are likely to attend due to its convenience. ReWA is in walking distance to Franklin High School which is another reason their program is so successful. In addition, ReWA offers free bus tickets at the end of the program so that students arrive home safely.

As previously mentioned, public schools have more access to resources and funding than most community-based organizations do. This is because they are not only funded by the government but they also qualify for educational grants and can therefore fund programs that help meet the needs of refugee youth in their schools. ReWA's primary youth development program currently serves between 15-20 students on a given day. If public schools open their doors and provide similar programs as ReWA does, even more students will be reached and given the tools they need to succeed.

Brown and Krŭsteva found that when host countries are a.) Culturally inclusive and b.) Intentionally provide equal access to educational resources and skill training, they have a "propensity to develop adults that are contented, emotional stable, economically contributing members of the global society" (xv). According to the Bureau of Labor

Statistics, 16.5 percent of foreign-born workers make up the U.S. workforce. It is predicted that this number will increase to 23 percent by 2050 (Roberts). With the pace of globalization quickening and the American workforce getting older, our investment in refugee youth today – through proper education and targeted after-school programming – will help sustain and grow our nation's economy.

Education For All

The Education for All (EFA) declaration is a global policy and strategy that was agreed upon by 155 countries in the year 1990 (Watters 95). Charles Watters describes its purpose as "addressing the global challenges arising from deficiencies in educational provision" (95). He says that there is "explicit reference in the declaration to the education of refugee children in Article 3 which refers to the removal of educational disparities for underserved groups including, 'refugees: those displaced by war, and people under occupation' (Watters 96). Elinor Brown and Anna Krŭsteva state, "Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations general Assembly states that everyone has the right to a free compulsory elementary education that fully develops the human personality, strengthens respect for human rights, and promotes understanding and tolerance" (xiv). While everyone has the right to a primary education, it is evident that our schools are neglecting to meet the needs of refugee youth. The staggering high school dropout rates among refugee youth is unacceptable and public schools must partner with local agencies already serving this population to ensure more students are getting the help they need to achieve academic success. According to Jan Stewart, "When students' needs are not being met by the system, students often leave it, either reluctantly or voluntarily. This often results in the

exacerbation of social issues and the further marginalization of the individual" (6). Refugee youth who end up falling through the cracks are more likely to drop out of high school often "turning to crime, becoming homeless, becoming a pregnant or parenting teen, etc. and never realizing their career potential" ("JA Refugee"). Public schools and community-based organizations have a unique opportunity to partner together to stop this vicious cycle and shape influential citizens of the future that give back to the community.

A Theory of Change

A theory of change helps bring strategic alignment towards a long-term vision or goal. World Vision defines a theory of change as the "building blocks required to achieve a defined long-term goal" ("Youth"). These building blocks are what bring our overall goals to fruition. In response to the decreasing high school graduation rates among adolescent refugees living in the U.S., I propose a theory of change: Refugee youth living in America are well equipped to become self-supporting citizens who give back to their communities. This is accomplished through the skills and knowledge taught in high school. These life tools will serve refugee youth well into adulthood.

As previously mentioned, a theory of change is made up of several different building blocks. These building blocks are interconnected and contain outcomes or "preconditions" that must occur in order to get to the desired theory of change. Therefore, in order for refugee youth to become law-abiding citizens who contribute to their communities, it is critical for them to complete their high school education. To earn a decent wage in America, a high school diploma is the minimum requirement and often is not enough to sustain themselves let alone a family. In order to break the cycle of poverty, it is essential that refugee youth graduate from high school. This can only occur

when they have adequate access to teachers, tutors, and after school programs that provide homework assistance, such as ReWA. After school programs can also help teach job-readiness skills such as the importance of honest, respect, punctuality and acting with integrity in the workforce and in life.

Another precondition that brings us one step closer to our long-term outcome is teaching refugee youth healthy coping skills to deal with the inevitable hardships of life. These could include group therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, journaling, painting, and/or songwriting. Refugee youth should also be encouraged to join social activities such as clubs, committees, school dances, and sports. These activities help build their friendship and teamwork skills while enhancing their creativity and critical thinking. By being a part of a team or group that meets consistently, refugee youth have an opportunity to be a team player and belong to something that not only benefits them but also their communities. Ultimately, as educators, development practitioners, and volunteers, we want refugee youth to understand the importance of giving back and paying it forward. Often times, these after school groups and activities focus on doing just that. By taking the focus off of themselves and volunteering their time towards a good cause, both communities and volunteers mutually benefit.

A theory of change is an important tool that should be utilized by individuals and organizations across many different sites as it helps to bring alignment and clear understanding. Given the vulnerable nature of refugee youth, it is crucial that caring adults guide them along the right path toward a healthy adulthood by teaching them the skills mentioned in this pathway of change. The preconditions listed in this pathway of change speak to refugee youth on the local and national level. Whether resettled in

Seattle, Washington or Tampa, Florida, refugee youth need to acquire the aforementioned skills in order to be well equipped for life in America beyond high school.

Educational and Psychosocial Needs of Refugee Youth

Most refugee students want to succeed in high school but face "numerous personal, organizational, and systemic challenges" (Stewart 67). These challenges include disrupted schooling, having to work and go to school, and having to learn English so they can function in society (Stewart 80). Most, if not all, students are placed in a classroom solely based on their age and not their academic competence. This is due to the lack of school records available from their often war-torn home countries and disruptions in education, if they've had any schooling at all. Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model provides the framework for the psychosocial and educational needs of refugee children (Stewart 15). Bronfenbrenner claims development occurs in contexts, and therefore can only be properly understood through contextualization (Anderson et al. 3). According to Bronfenbrenner, the influence of the ever-changing environment has direct implications on a refugee child's development. Anderson et al. recognize the validity of Bronfenbrenner's model stating, "Given the diverse nature of refugees' experiences, the significance of contextual events past and present on contextual factors to be considered, we have adopted Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development as an integral part of our model" (3). In acknowledgement of the disruptions that often occur in refugees' lives, Anderson et al. adapted Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model to include three phases of migration: pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration (Stewart 17). Anderson et al. state, "In addition to these phases of migration, normal developmental changes will be occurring simultaneously that will also need to be considered" (Stewart

17). Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological conceptual framework to the design of after school programs will provide educators and civil servants with a better understanding of refugee students' needs and the ways to be support them through the migratory process (Anderson et al. 5). The five environmental systems of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model consist of: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Appendix B). Bronfenbrenner conceptualizes each of these interacting systems as nested one inside the other (Anderson et al. 4). At the core of his theory, Brofenbrenner "conceptualizes development as the interactive life-long process of adaptation by an individual to the changing environment" (Anderson et al. 4). By taking into account the impact of personal and environmental factors on refugee youth, we are able to design programs that effectively meet their unique needs and help increase their likelihood of graduating high school.

Building Culturally Sensitive Youth Programs

When designing after school programs for refugee youth that are effective and meet their diverse needs, it is important to apply cultural sensitivity into every aspect of the program. Cultural sensitivity refers to "being aware that cultural differences and similarities exist and have an effect on values, learning, and behavior" (Lopez-De Fede). Refugee youth arrive to America from countries all over the world. Every person carries with them a set of cultural beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and influences, all based on their individual cultures. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist and author of *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* along with co-authors Gert Jan Hofstede and Michael Minkov, define culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (6). Geert

Hofstede dedicated a significant portion of his life studying cross-cultural communication in the workplace. After conducting a comprehensive research study in more than seventy countries over a forty-year span, Geert Hofstede discovered six dimensions of national culture. By studying the cultural indices of the communities we serve, "we can get a good overview of the deep drivers of its culture relative to other world cultures" ("Country"). When designing programs that help ease the resettlement process for refugee youth and equip them with the tools they need to achieve academic success, applying Geert Hofestede's Cultural Dimensions Theory will be highly beneficial. In order to build more robust, culturally sensitive programs that serve refugee youth well, we must research their individual cultures and integrate their beliefs and values into our curriculum. When we take the time to learn about their cultures, we engage more students and increase their chances of graduating high school.

ReWA serves predominantly East African families, including Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, and Eritrea. Utilizing the country comparison tool on the Hofstede website, I compared the United States' cultural dimensions to Ethiopia (Appendix C). The Power Distance Index (PDI) refers to the way power is distributed within a given country. Geert Hofstede defines PDI as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (61). For PDI, Ethiopia has a higher PDI at 70 compared to the United States' score of 40. Meaning, Ethiopians "accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification" ("Country"). While Ethiopians are taught to respect authority figures and elders without question, it is important for us to provide them a safe place to express their concerns and frustrations. The second cultural dimension in Geert

Hofstede's model is Individualism versus Collectivism. The former pertains to societies where everyone is expected to look after just themselves and their immediate family (Hofstede 92). The latter pertains to societies where "people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede 92). Ethiopia is considered to be a collectivist society with a score of 20 as compared to the U.S. score of 91. This means that refugee students from this country prefer to do things in groups. When designing a program that caters to this demographic, it will be important to include lessons and games that require teamwork. The third cultural dimension is Masculinity versus Femininity. Ethiopia ranks at 65 and the US ranks closely at 62. Both Ethiopia and the US are therefore considered Masculine societies. According to the Hofstede website: "A high score (Masculine) on this dimension indicates that the society will be driven by competition, achievement and success, with success being defined by the winner / best in field – a value system that starts in school and continues throughout organizational life." This is another important factor to keep in mind when designing refugee youth programs. The majority of refugee youth want to succeed in school and their parents also value the importance of education. It is important for us to keep this in mind during times of frustration and questioning whether or not the refugee youth we are serving want to succeed. We must figure out ways to keep them engaged and try our hardest to remove the barriers that come in between them achieving academic success. Hofstede's cultural indices are worth studying when building refugee youth programs that are both culturally sensitive and effective. Furthermore, engaging students in conversation about their cultures will enlighten staff to their values and needs in an after school program. By

utilizing Hofstede's country comparison tool, both public schools and community-based organizations, such as ReWA, can better understand the cultural values of their clients and tailor their programs accordingly.

The Reality of Globalization

We live in an increasingly globalized world, more interconnected and interdependent than ever before. Globalization refers to the increasing integration of "political, economic and social life of the peoples of this planet" (Groody 13). With the U.S. raising its annual cap of incoming refugees from 70,000 in 2015 to 85,000 in 2016 and 100,000 in 2017, public schools are going to continue seeing more and more refugee students in their classroom ("John"). Daniel G. Groody states, "Whether one sees it as positive or negative, globalization is nonetheless an integral part of the world picture and an evolving part of human society" (15). The future leaders, teachers, and parents of our country are the students who sit in our classrooms today. This includes both refugees and immigrant youth. Therefore, we must do whatever it takes to provide each and every student equal access to a quality education. In her book *Refugee Children in the Classroom* Jill Rutter suggests three provisions to welcome new students appropriately: (a) That an educational policy is in full effect for refugee children; (b) That teachers have a foundational knowledge of multicultural and English as a Second Language (ESL) education and understand the characteristics of refugees and (c) "An overall positive educational framework is established in the school that prepares children 'for life in a multi-ethnic democracy''(Szente and Hoot 220). Far too many schools are underprepared for the arrival of refugee students. According to Anderson et al., most of our current educational systems fail to have special support systems in place to help refugee students

and their families adapt to their schools (qtd. in Szente 220). With globalization here to stay, we must provide services such as English language classes, behavioral health treatment, individualized tutoring and mentorship to well equip the next generation of outstanding leaders, teachers, employees and parents.

Conclusion

In closing, public schools and community-based organizations who serve refugee families need to partner together to drastically improve high school graduation rates among refugee youth living in the United States. The declining high school completion rates are unacceptable and public schools are doing a disservice to the refugee community. Refugee youth must have access to the same resources non-foreign born students have in America. In addition to homework assistance, tutoring, and mentoring, after school programs need to offer English language tutoring, college and Federal Student Aid application assistance, and job readiness programs. ReWA's youth programs are an excellent example of how a refugee youth program should be run. By utilizing ReWA's successful model, public schools and other community-based organizations can increase high school graduation rates among this population. In order for refugee youth programs to be successful, they must be culturally sensitive and inclusive. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and other culture context data allows program developers and teachers to contextualize the people they are serving and learn how to best meet their diverse needs. Through partnership with public schools, community-based organizations, such as ReWA, will have more resources and manpower to reach even more refugee youth in their communities. Public schools are responsible for providing each and every one of their students the tools and skills they need to successfully graduate high school.

The statistics show that the high school dropout rates among refugee youth are increasing. In order for them to earn a decent living wage, provide for themselves and their families, and pursue higher education if they so desire, refugee youth must complete their high school education. Public schools need to do everything in their power to ensure their students each have an equal opportunity to achieve academic success. Refugee youth have to overcome many barriers when they arrive in the U.S., including learning English as a second language, PTSD, Anxiety, and Depression from witnessed violence and trauma, in addition to dealing with the hardships that already come with being a teenager in high school. The formed partnerships between public schools and community-based organizations, who currently serve refugee youth, will see an increase in high school graduation rates as these students become more engaged and are given the appropriate tools to overcome obstacles. Education breaks the cycle of poverty and gives refugee students the skills, tools and knowledge they need to fulfill their dreams. Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Education offers endless possibilities and liberates people to become anything they want to be. We cannot allow one more refugee student to slip through the cracks of our faulty education system. We must offer them the same chance at living a successful and fulfilling life that we ourselves have had. Globalization is only growing and refugees will continue to flee to the U.S. for safety and to start a new life. Our investment in refugee youth today – through proper education and targeted after-school programming – will help sustain and grow our nation's economy. The students in our classrooms today are the future parents and leaders of tomorrow. Together, we can dramatically improve the high school graduation rates among refugee youth and help

them overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles for the betterment of their futures and ours.

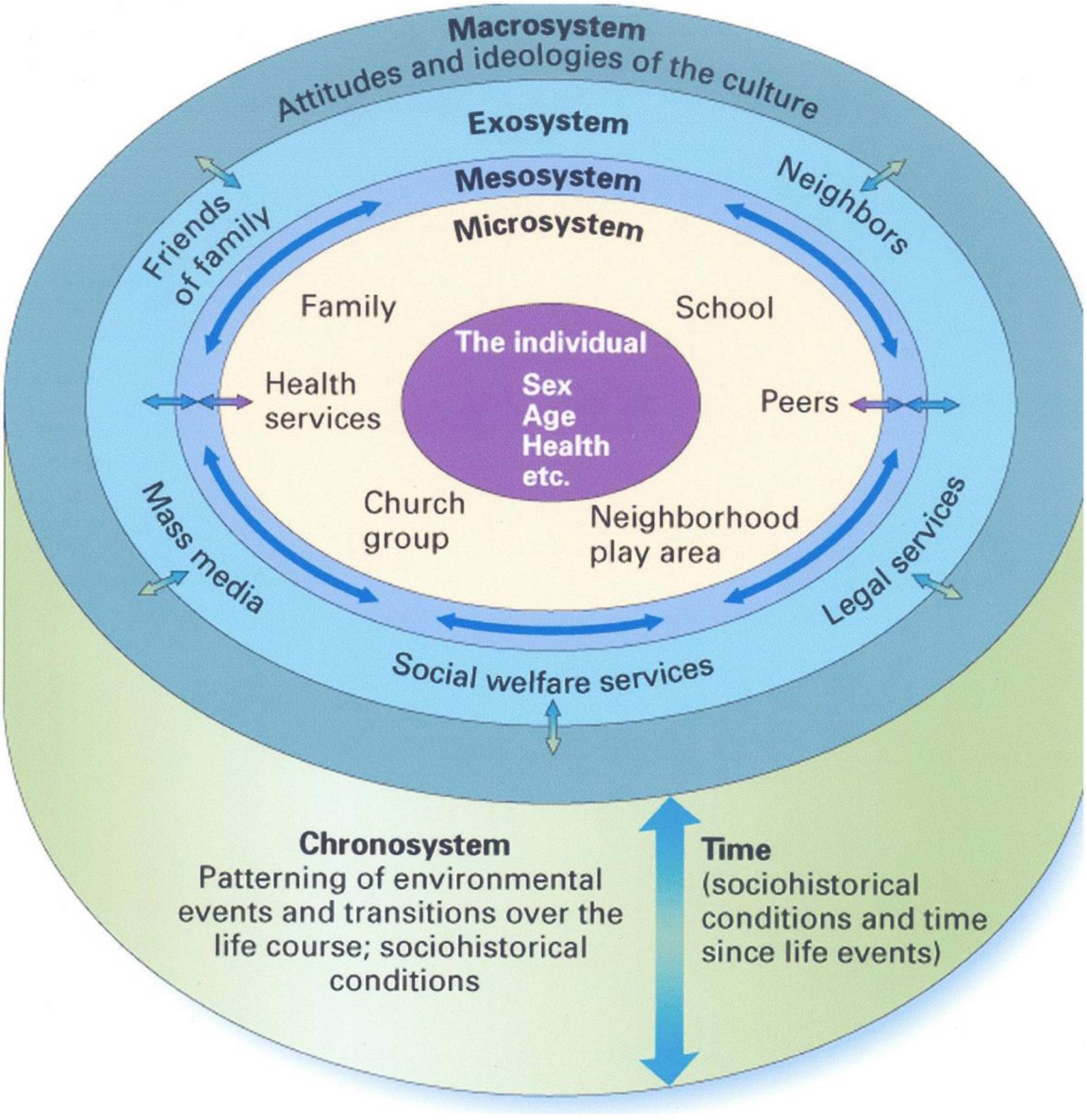
Appendix A

The Wraparound Model

Source: "Community Supports." *Teaching Refugees with Limited Formal Schooling*. Calgary Board of Education, n.d. Web. 13 Mar. 2016.

Appendix B

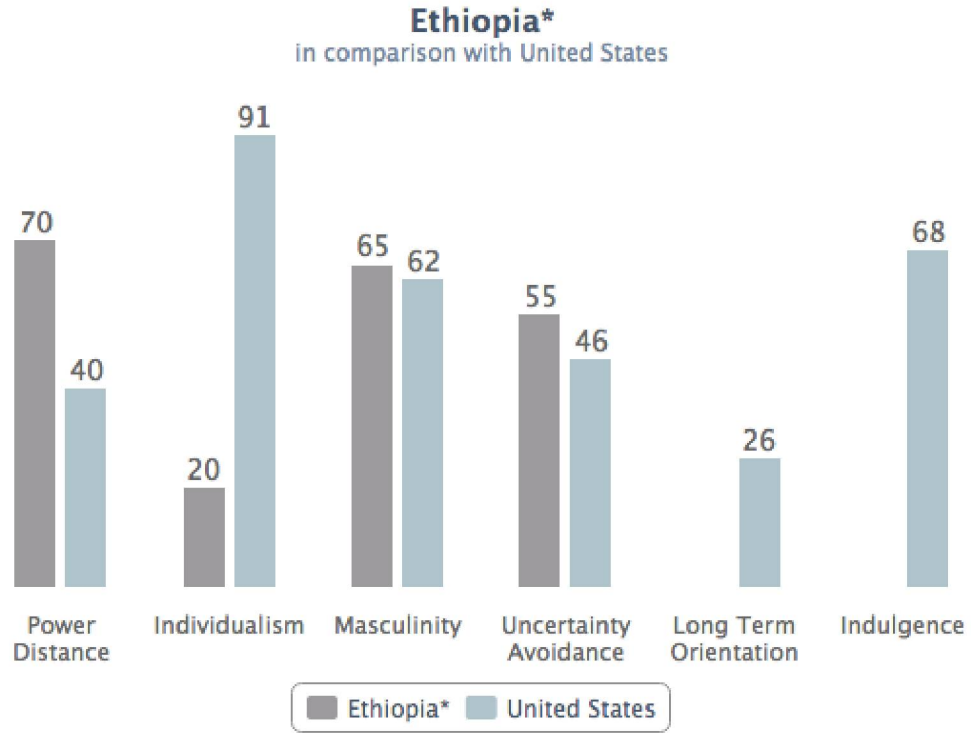
Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development



Source: Bronfenbrenner, Urie. *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Child Development*. Digital image. *Research Repository*. The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2011. Web. 21 Feb. 2016.

Appendix C

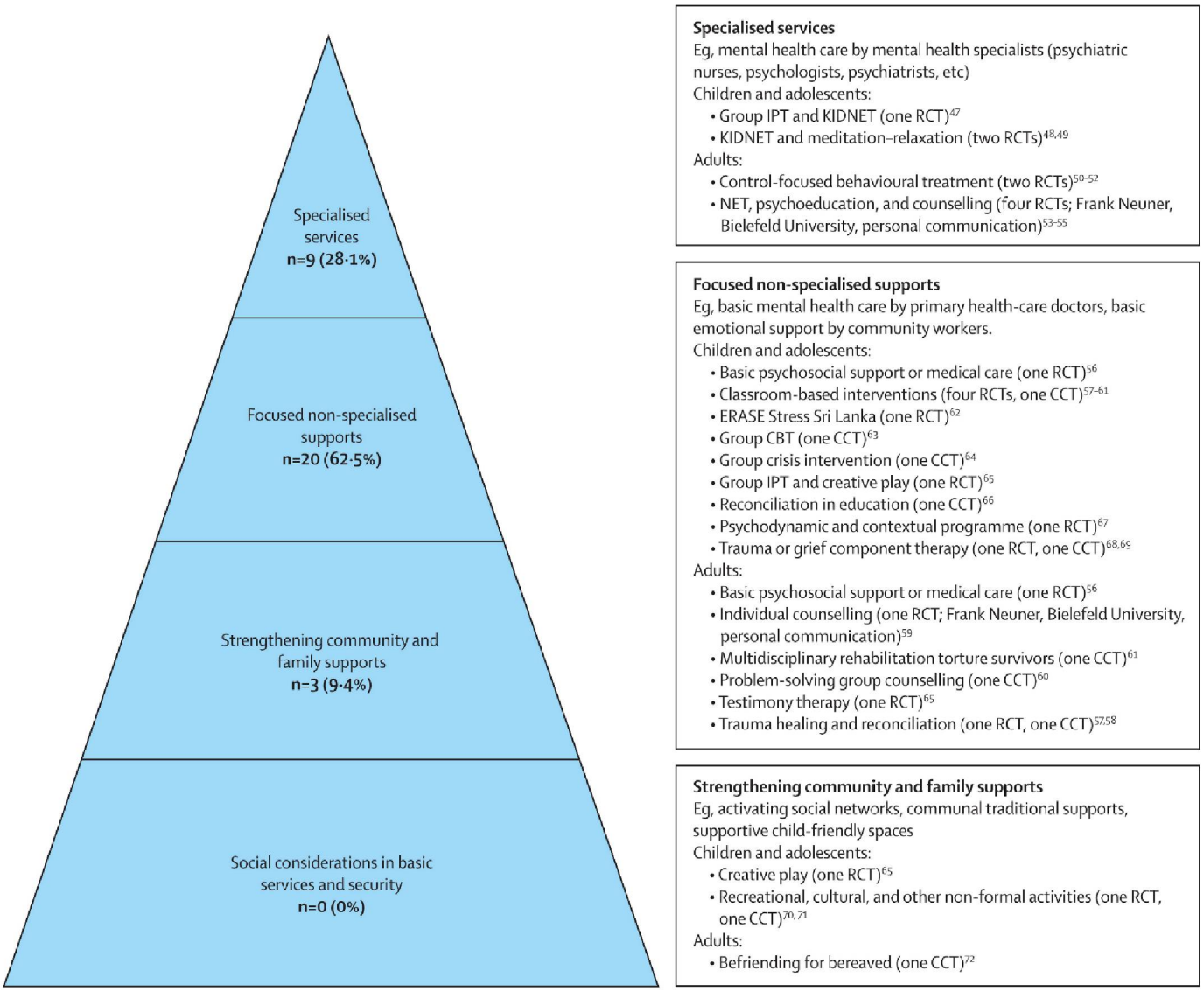
Hofstede Country Comparison



Source: Hofstede, Geert. *Country Comparison*. Digital image. *Geert Hofstede*. Hofstede Centre, n.d. Web. 21 Feb. 2016.

Appendix D

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Pyramid



Source: *The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Pyramid*. Digital image. *Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings: Linking Practice and Research*. The Lancet, Oct. 2011. Web.

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